

THE STUDY OF MAN

THE DOWNWARD TREND OF JEWISH POPULATION

An Examination of Some Vital Statistics

L. HERSCH

DISCUSSIONS of the Jewish future: of the Jewish religion, of Jewish culture, of the new Jewish state, become ever more subtle and complex. Yet there is one factor dominating the potentialities of Jewish life which is rarely introduced into these discussions: the Jewish birth rate. If Jewishness is to survive, there must continue to be Jews. But how many Jews will remain to carry on Jewish religion, culture, politics in fifty or a hundred or five hundred years? If the available statistics and indicated trends give no certain answer, they at least offer sufficient evidence to further disturb those concerned over the Jewish future. Here, in any case, is a question that promises to push more pressingly to the fore with the passage of time.

Demography—the science of the study of

AFTER the war, and the extermination of two-fifths of the Jewish people, the question of Jewish survival on the simple physical level has come to the fore: how many Jews will there be in the future, will the number of Jews increase or decline? L. HERSCH is professor of statistics and demography at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, Vice President of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, and is perhaps the world's leading authority on the demography of the Jews. He was born in Lithuania in 1882, and studied at the University of Warsaw. His activity in the Jewish workers' movement forced him to leave Czarist Russia, and he completed his studies at the University of Geneva. Just recently, he delivered the opening address at the World Jewish Culture Conference in New York. He is the author of many books, and of the articles on Jewish migration and demography in the Yiddish *Algemeine Entzyklopedie*, and *The Jewish People: Past and Present*.

population, its natural growth and decline—is like individual health: as long as one is well, one hardly thinks of it. And in the same way, as long as a people continues to increase, one rarely pauses to project the exact curve of the future. After the recent mass extermination of Jews in Europe, surely there were few Jews who did not find themselves speculating about the chances of their people's survival.

To the demographic expert, the prospect must inevitably seem even more precarious. For he knows that when the great catastrophe struck the Jews, its "normal" population movement already showed very disquieting symptoms. The fact is that, even before the war, the natural increase in the number of Jews had almost ceased. More than that, it was on the verge of a steady decline.

The century before 1939 had seen the greatest natural growth of Jewish population in history. In the most flourishing periods in ancient Jewish history there were not more than four million Jews, fewer than in the United States alone today. About 1840, world Jewish population again stood at this figure, about 1880 it rose above seven and a half million, and in 1936 it stood at about sixteen and a half million—more than four times as many Jews as there had ever been in the ancient world.

And yet, even before the First World War attentive observers had begun to point out grave signs in Jewish population developments in certain countries. In 1911, Theilhaber published *The Decline of German Jewry*. The facts first noticed among German Jews shortly after manifested themselves among the Jewish populations of other West and Central European countries: Bohemia, Moravia, Italy, Hungary, and elsewhere, and in the United States,

whose Jewish population came to resemble more and more that of Western Europe. It was only the enormous natural growth of the Jews of Eastern Europe that accounted for a rapid over-all increase in the total Jewish population of Europe and the world. And it was the emigration of millions of Eastern European Jews overseas or to Western Europe that more than covered the deficits that might otherwise have taken place, with the natural decline of the autochthonous Jewish population of these countries. The extermination of the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe, therefore, signified more than the loss of millions of individuals: it also meant the drying up of the most important reservoir for the natural growth of the Jewish people.

THE Jewish population of Czechoslovakia offers us, in regard to population movements, a miniature image of the Jewish world in general. Here East and West were found within the borders of a single state without either losing its distinctive characteristics. The Jewish populations of its Eastern provinces, Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Slovakia, presented the typical characteristics of Eastern Jews, and those of its Western provinces, Bohemia and Moravia, revealed the characteristics of Western Jewry. Comparing births and deaths in 1930 and 1933, for the entire country and for each of its provinces, we may quickly discern some significant facts. Graphically, the picture is in the following table:

For the moment let us note this one fact: while, in the period considered, the Jewish population of Czechoslovakia still showed a considerable natural increase (almost 2,500 in 1930 and almost 1,400 in 1933, or 7 per thousand in the first year, and 4 per thousand in the second), this increase was due entirely to Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Slovakia; the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia showed a decline.

What these figures demonstrated for Czechoslovakia was and is true for Jews all over the world.

The decline of the Jewish populations of the West before the war was caused by the exceptional decline in the number of births, rather than by an increase in the number of deaths. A mortality rate of 12 to 15 per thousand, such as was the case in Czechoslovakia, is rather low and is only found among the advanced European peoples. For a population to grow the birth rate must exceed this figure, and only among Eastern Jews did it do so. Among the Jews of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the birth rate reached the figures of 35 (in 1930) and 31 (in 1933) per thousand against a death rate of about 12 per thousand. In Bohemia and Moravia, as in the Western countries in general, the birth rate fell to half the death rate in 1930 and to almost a third of the death rate in 1933.

The fall in the birth rate is not a specifically Jewish phenomenon: it characterizes all the populations of Western civilization. However, in almost every area for which we have statistics

		1930					
NUMBER OF JEWS CENSUS OF 1930		(PER 1000 JEWS)			(ABSOLUTE FIGURES)		
		BIRTHS	DEATHS	DIFFERENCE	BIRTHS	DEATHS	DIFFERENCE
Bohemia	76,301	8	15	—7	625	1,157	—532
Moravia	41,250	8	15	—7	317	576	—259
Slovakia	136,737	18.5	12	+6	2,525	1,656	+869
Subcarpathian Ruthenia	102,542	35	12	+24	3,608	1,189	+2,419
Czechoslovakia	356,830	20	13	+7	7,075	4,578	+2,497
		1933					
Bohemia		5	14	—9	399	1,055	—656
Moravia		6	15	—9	261	622	—361
Slovakia		16	12	+4	2,140	1,584	+556
Subcarpathian Ruthenia		31	13	+18	3,152	1,304	+1,848
Czechoslovakia		17	13	+4	5,952	4,565	+1,387

we find a lower birth rate among Jews than among the surrounding non-Jewish population. The canton of Geneva, with a birth rate of 9.2 per thousand in 1936-39, is one of the most sterile regions of the globe. What shall we say then of the Jewish population of Moravia and Bohemia, which in 1933 already showed birth rates of 6.3 and 5.2?

THE reader may perhaps have been surprised to notice that the Jewish death rate in Bohemia and Moravia was rather greater than in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Yet were not the Jews of the first two provinces much wealthier and much more "advanced" than those of the last two?

The cause is to be found in another factor extremely serious for Western Jewry: its extraordinary aging. As a consequence of the fall in the birth rate, the number of young people had been reduced to a very small percentage of the total. This fall in the birth rate did not affect the over-all population figure too much because of a simultaneous fall in the death rate. But the prolongation of life increases still further the proportion of old persons, already increased by the reduction in the number of infants and children. The result is an age composition which has dangerous implications for the future: the pyramid of the population by age, instead of being wide at the base, for infants and children, and narrowing as one reaches advanced age, is quite narrow at the base, and, with age, becomes wider higher up.

The phenomenon of the aging of the population can be observed in varying degrees among all Western populations, but again, among no population is this "reversal of the pyramids" as striking as among the Jews.

The percentage of the total population constituted by children up to the age of fifteen, around 1930, was: 22.9 in France, 23 in Prussia, 23.8 in England, 25.4 in Switzerland, 22.8 in Bohemia, 26.3 in Moravia. Among the Western Jews corresponding figures were: 15.8 in Prussia, 13.7 in Switzerland, 13.1 in Bohemia, 14.3 in Moravia. The percentage 60 years or over, around 1930, was 11.5 in England, 12.8 in Prussia, 13.9 in France, 10.9 in Bohemia, 10.2 in Moravia. But among Jews corresponding percentages were 15.7 in Prussia, 15.6 in Moravia, 16.4 in Bohemia, and so on. Western Jews thus formed a population much "older" than even that of France.

The differences in age distribution between

Western and Eastern Jews on the eve of the last war could hardly have been more striking. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the percentage of those above sixty was only 7.6 per cent among Jews in Subcarpathian Ruthenia and 11 in Slovakia, but this figure was 15.6 in Moravia and 16.4 in Bohemia. And while among the Jews of Subcarpathian Ruthenia the proportion of those above sixty was only one-fifth the proportion of children under fifteen (7.6 as against 36.6 per cent), in Bohemia and Moravia there were more persons above sixty than children (16.4 against 13.1 per cent, and 15.6 against 14.3 per cent).

Eastern Jews were not only more prolific, but younger, than Western Jews, and this is why the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia, while having at each age level a much lower mortality than the Jews of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, showed an over-all death rate considerably higher. Consequently, between the two world wars, the death rate among the Jews of Central Europe, which had fallen to a very low level, began to rise again, as a result of the higher proportion of the aged.

WE HAVE touched on one of the essential reasons why the difference between the number of births and deaths, while showing whether a population has actually increased or declined, and by how much, gives no idea of the biological vitality of a population. The simultaneous fall of a birth rate and a death rate, which has occurred in most Western countries, may leave unchanged the actual surplus of births over deaths, but by lowering the proportion of youth and increasing the proportion of the aged it must involve, in the long run, an increase in deaths and a fall in the number of future procreators, that is, a decline in births, even if the fecundity of the procreating population (the average number of children born to each woman) does not decline with time.

This is what was happening to the Jews of the West before the Second World War, and this condition was certain to be accentuated with the persistent decline in the number of children.

To emphasize the ultimate effects that a given demographic situation implies, it has become the practice to compare the number of births, not with the number of deaths, but with the number of persons in the population of child-bearing age. One thus calculates to what degree the procreating population reproduces

itself. More concretely, one calculates the number of female children who will reach child-bearing age for each thousand women fifteen to fifty, according to the fecundity and mortality rates of the given date (Kuczynski's method): if the number is 1,000, the population tends to remain stationary; if it is higher than 1,000, it tends to increase; if it is lower than 1,000, the population of child-bearing age is not reproducing itself, the new child-bearing population will therefore be less numerous than the present one, and, even without a new decline in the fecundity of females, will give birth in its turn to a procreating population less numerous than itself, and so on generation after generation. In the last case, the population tends to decline even if the number of births is at the moment greater than the number of deaths.

The present writer has proposed a more refined measure of the vitality of a population, which takes into account the differential life expectancies of individuals of different ages and the different age compositions of different populations—the method of “life potentials.” Using this method the disastrous regression in the vitality of Western Jewry, as a result of its extraordinary aging, would stand out distinctly.

Unhappily, for no country do we possess the necessary statistical information for the accurate calculation of the “reproduction rate” of the Jewish population (Kuczynski's method) or for its “life potentials.” Nevertheless, for some countries one can approximately calculate the reproduction rate of the Jewish population. Here is what the writer has calculated for the different provinces of Czechoslovakia in 1933 (the figure “1” indicates that the child-bearing population is just reproducing itself):

Subcarpathian Ruthenia	1.58
Slovakia	.72
Moravia	.28
Bohemia	.23
Czechoslovakia	.83

These figures, interpreted, mean that before the last war the Jewish population of child-bearing age in Bohemia and Moravia was replacing barely a quarter of itself. That is, even if the decline in the fecundity of the Jewish population had abruptly stopped after 1933, after a single generation there would have been only a fourth the women of child-bearing ages there were in 1933, at the end of another generation only a sixteenth, and so on.

The Jews of other Western countries showed a similar demographic picture, in varying degrees. Thus, even without the Hitlerian persecution and exterminations, Western Jewry seemed to be slated for virtual disappearance at the end of a few generations.

THE phenomenal rise in the number of East European Jews, and consequently of the world Jewish population, in the 19th century—its part of a phenomenal “explosion of population” in Europe—was due above all to a rapid decline in mortality; this was the result of the advance of science, both in its direct effects through medicine and sanitation and indirectly by making possible a great increase in the food supply. But any decline in the death rate has natural limits. A stationary population in which everyone lived to the age of one hundred would have an annual death rate of one per cent or ten per thousand. The decline in the death rate will obviously tend to grind to a halt somewhere before that figure. Our table of Czechoslovak Jewish population showed that the annual average death rate had already fallen in 1930 to 12 per thousand for Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. The figures for the rest of Europe were the same or even a little lower. No further important decline in mortality could be expected.

At the same time, since the beginning of the 20th century, and more markedly after the First World War, the birth rate of Eastern European Jews had begun to fall, at first in the big cities and then everywhere. In Galicia the Jewish birth rate at the end of the 19th century stood at the extraordinary figure of 40.4; in 1931-35 (when Galicia was part of Poland), the Jewish birth rate in Poland was 19.3. In Bulgaria, the Jewish birth rate dropped from 30.8 in 1909-12 to 16.9 in 1933-36; in Lithuania, it fell from 16.5 in 1925-7 to the extraordinarily low figure of 12 in 1931-5; and so on. Subcarpathian Ruthenia itself, whose Jewish population was among the most prolific in Europe, saw its high birth rate begin to decline in the last years before the war: it fell from 35.2 in 1930 to 30.7 in 1933.

The fall in the birth rate was particularly marked in the great cities. In Warsaw, the Jewish birth rate fell from 28.6 in 1900-03 to 13.1 in 1930-36; in Budapest, from 30.0 in 1896-1900 to 7.8 in 1931-34.

As for the reproduction rates of the Jewish populations of the East, we have already seen

that in Czechoslovakia, on the eve of the Second World War, a growing population was indicated only in the province of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, a potential decline was indicated in the population of the Western provinces and even in Slovakia, where the reproduction rate fell to .72. For Poland as a whole, the reproduction rates in 1931-5 forecast no decline in the population. In Bulgaria, about the same time, the reproduction rate among Jews had dropped to .71; in Hungary to .44; in Warsaw to .47; and in Budapest to .33.

The margin between the ever-falling birth rate and more slowly declining or relatively steady death rate narrowed among Jews all over the world. The average annual increase in world Jewry fell from 200,000 at the beginning of the 20th century to below 100,000 on the eve of the Second World War.

The difference between Western and Eastern Jews was fundamentally only a difference of time. The Jewish populations of the West had entered the path of the double drop—of birth rate and death rate—somewhat earlier. On the eve of the Second World War, East European Jewry was still able to show a surplus of births over deaths, but the growth of the population was already accompanied by its aging.

Such was the situation created by the demographic development of the Jewish populations when the Second World War intervened, and with it, the mass exterminations. We still do not know exactly how many Jews perished, and we will not know until new censuses are taken in Europe. At the moment it seems that the number was about six millions. From a people of about sixteen and a half million on the eve of the Second World War we have become a people of about ten million. And from an essentially *European* people we have become today an essentially *American* people.

The enormous Jewish emigration from Europe, we can now see, in the brief space of a generation (1880 to 1914) saved the Jewish people from certain doom. As the Yiddish proverb has it: God prepares the remedy before the plague.

A PORTION of the people was saved. If one believes the Bible, the seventy souls who made up Jacob's household when he arrived in Egypt became, after 430 years, a nation which counted 603,000 men above the age of twenty, not including Levites. And four million Jews in

1840 became sixteen and a half million in 1939. But with the demographic situation that characterized the Jewish people before the war, it is completely impossible—unless some unforeseen reversal of trend sets in—that the Jewish population will ever rise to sixteen and a half million, or even maintain its present reduced numbers.

We have already shown that the Jews of Europe, what with their low reproduction rate before the war, and the wiping out of their most prolific branches, can only diminish in the future. For non-European countries, our conclusion must be less categorical, for we possess relatively little sure information about most of these Jews.

On the Jews of the United States, who form today almost half of the Jewish population, there is practically no information. However, the main demographic characteristics of the Jews in America can hardly be open to doubt. It is true that the vast majority of American Jews are in their origin East European and might be expected to show a higher fecundity than the Jews of Western Europe. But the higher fecundity of the Eastern Jews was a transitory historical phenomenon, and newer historical developments were already leading to its disappearance in Europe, particularly in the cities. This historical development has undoubtedly been more rapid in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia—which among them hold two-thirds of American Jewry—than in the cities and towns of Poland, Lithuania, and Rumania. We know, too, that the American Jews are middle class, not lower class; produce a high proportion of college-educated persons and professionals; and show other social characteristics associated with a very low birth rate. One can hardly suppose that Jewish fecundity in New York is higher than in Warsaw before the war; and in the latter city the Jewish population of child-bearing age was then reproducing barely half of itself.

The situation appears at first glance more favorable in Palestine, where Jews, also mainly of East European origin, have shown a very high birth rate, scarcely lower than that of the Jews of Subcarpathian Ruthenia: 34.3 per thousand in 1926-30, 30.3 per thousand in 1931-35, and 25.8 in 1936-40. But the importance of this fact should not be exaggerated. First, Palestinian Jewry, even after the war (but before the recent large-scale immigration), made up only 6 per cent of the Jewish people. Then, as the figures just quoted show, the birth rate

tends to decline in Palestine too. Finally, the present relatively high birth rate of the Jewish population of Palestine is due in very large measure to the fact that, as a population of very recent immigration, it includes a very high proportion of young adults: its high birth rate indicates therefore neither a fecund population nor a high reproduction rate. The net reproduction rate of Palestinian Jewry on the eve of the Second World War (it was .88) already indicated it would not maintain its numbers without immigration.

One must also take into consideration the fact that the Nazi exterminations struck Jewry at a time when the birth rate was not only already too low to ensure the maintenance of Jewish populations, but still further declining. It was falling in the West despite the very low level it had already reached. It was falling rapidly in the cities in the East. It was falling in every country in the East with the exodus of the young populations from towns and villages and their concentration in urban centers or their departure overseas. It was falling among the "masses," and above all among the intellectuals and upper classes who saw in birth control a means of social advance and a mark of cultural progress. The continuation of pre-war demographic trends can then be counted on to make still wider, in the future, the great gaps cut in the Jewish people by the Nazi devastation.

Aggravating further the postwar Jewish demographic problem is the extermination of the children. Evidently the Nazis concentrated with particular emphasis on the destruction of Jewish children. Too, young children naturally succumbed more easily to the insupportable conditions of life under Nazi occupation. Figures for the Jewish population of many countries, broken down according to age, reveal that the situation proved much more disastrous in the East than in the West, where the Christian population showed much more interest in helping save Jewish children. But even the children thus saved are not all saved for Judaism. Many of those taken in by Christian families, by monasteries and other religious institutions, have so won the affections of their foster parents and have become so attached to them that they do not wish to be taken away.

In considering the future of the Jewish people in Europe, one must finally take into account the inevitable consequences of being a small, scattered population. The assimilatory effect of the surrounding non-Jewish milieu in Europe

is necessarily much greater if the Jews form smaller, less dense concentrations. This fact alone helps increase the number of conversions, mixed marriages, and so on. Mixed marriages do not necessarily signify the abandonment of Judaism; but when they occur among Jews scattered in small numbers in non-Jewish populations, mixed marriages mean a loss of future generations for Judaism.

IT is the same with cultural life. The small number of Jews makes more difficult the carrying on of cultural activities, education, and so on, and insofar as cultural life does exist, it must be poorer. But even leaving aside the assimilatory effects of the non-Jewish milieu, and looking only at the specifically demographic aspect of the problem, a very small population dispersed in a larger one can be shown to have serious difficulties in maintaining itself.

The Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems, created and directed by Professor Corrado Gini, organized a series of studies of small, endogamous populations. Certain of the observations made in the course of one of these studies, in which the present writer took an active part, that of the Karaites of Poland and Lithuania, throw light on the conditions Jews may now have to reckon with.

These Karaites number about nine hundred, and they form both an ethnic and a religious group, speaking their own Turko-Tartar language and are strictly endogamous. Those marrying outside the group are considered apostates. This population is on the way to extinction, precisely because of its small numbers. Normally the number of persons of each sex in any population is almost the same. But when we deal with small groups, temporary but sizeable surpluses of one sex or another are likely. Among the Karaites, spread in small groups of rarely more than a hundred, it was often necessary to travel from one end of Poland to the other to find a suitable marriage partner. The proportion of unmarried persons of both sexes was extraordinarily high among them. The average age at marriage was high, and this too reduced fecundity. Marriages between near relatives or between old men and young women, and old women and young men, which are also less fecund, were numerous. Finally, as life is stronger than tradition, mixed marriages among the Karaite community was abandoned by a portion of the youth.

Obviously, this example of the effects of small

numbers, as seen among the Karaites, is an extreme case. European Jews are as yet far from the Karaite situation. Yet even before the war, the proportion of the married among Jews was considerably lower than that among the surrounding population. Who can doubt that today the difficulties of finding marriage partners in the Jewish community is considerably greater than it was before the war, particularly in small communities, and that one will find a higher proportion of unmarried, more mixed marriages, a higher average age at marriage, more marriages between old and young persons, and consequently a reduction in fecundity?

Already before the war, the small number of persons of marriageable age made itself painfully felt in the small Jewish communities of the West. The Nazi exterminations have now transformed all the Jews of Europe, in this connection, into communities of the Western pattern.

WHAT chance is there now for a recovery of world Jewry to its pre-war numbers, or even the maintenance of its present numbers? Under the circumstances described above, none at all. The Jews of Europe, reduced as they are, can only decline rapidly in the future, even without taking into account the effects of emigration, and in a few generations, if no other causes intervene, will be tiny communities. In the lands of immigration—America and Israel—we have seen that, insofar as we have statistics, the reproduction rate has already fallen below the minimum necessary to maintain the population—especially among Jews of European origin in Israel—and there is no reason to believe conditions are different for those areas for which we have no definite information. Even in these countries, we must expect at the end of a generation a decline in the number of native Jews, though this may for a time be covered by the immigration of the European remnants.

The prospects, however, are much more favorable for Jews of Asiatic or North African origin. The high birth rate of the Jews in these countries is now accompanied by a very high death rate. But in Israel, where this high mortality is reduced, and where statistics are available, broken down for countries of origin, we can see that the net reproduction rate of the Jews of Asia and North Africa is very high: it stands at a figure of 2.02.*

*See my article on "The Jewish Population of Palestine," in *The Jewish People*, Volume II, New York, Jewish Encyclopedic Handbooks, 1948.

Since the end of the war, a marked increase in the birth rate has been noticed among the remaining Jews of Europe. Is this the awakening of some instinct for the conservation of the race? Or is it only the transitory phenomenon which habitually follows big wars? It is still too early to say.

But perhaps this phenomenon should indicate to us that even in an area so apparently removed from possibilities of human control as population growth, some redressing of the situation is possible. After all, the demographic problem today is not only a Jewish one. Before the war, the reproduction rate had fallen below the minimum necessary to maintain the population in France, in almost all the countries of Central and Northern Europe, and in many other countries in the sphere of Western civilization. The last war struck everyone with the importance of population for national security, and in many countries attempts are being made to maintain or raise the population by maternal benefits, family allowances, and so on.

The Jews in the countries in which such measures are being undertaken will presumably also benefit from them. But for the Jews certain special measures would seem necessary. First, to know where we are and where we are going, we must have statistics as exact and detailed as possible on Jewish demography. This involves getting national censuses to collect information for nationality, religion, and national origin—depending on the country in question, and the way Jews consider themselves there. And where this is not possible or not sufficient or seems unwise for considerations of public policy, these statistics should be collected independently by Jewish organizations. Second, Jewish health work should be strengthened to reduce mortality among Jews, particularly among the survivors of the Hitler regime in Europe, who even today suffer from the effects of those years. Third, there should be an expansion of the work of such organizations as OSE, which have since the end of the war been involved in the work of caring for Jewish orphans, improving the health of Jewish children, taking up the Jewish orphans from the places where they were concealed and raising them as Jews.

But all these measures are obviously palliatives, and only a large rise in the number of births can radically change the situation. And this depends directly on one single basic factor: the will toward Jewish survival of the present generation of young Jewish adults.